

Hope For THE LAST ECHOS

THE CONSERVATION OF THE ECHO PARAKEET FROM MAURITIUS



Appeals board used successfully at Paradise Park, U.K. in 1989.

The World Parrot Trust would like to place more of these in zoos for 1990.

One of the world's rarest and most endangered birds is the Echo Parakeet, *Psittacula eques*, from Mauritius, which the World Parrot Trust is involved in trying to save. Mauritius is, however, best known for the Dodo that became extinct sometime in the 1660s. There are also many other species which have disappeared, and it is our job to try and stop the Echo Parakeet joining them. We do not know exactly how many birds have already gone, but it is at least seventeen species. The early accounts suggest an island vibrant with bird life, and flocks of parrots, grey, green and multi-

coloured species, were described. One of the largest parrots ever to exist, the flightless broad-billed Parrot *Lophopsittacus mauritianus*, was found on Mauritius. However it regrettably disappeared very early on in the history of the island and we know precious little about this extraordinary bird.

Several of the islands of the Indian Ocean had their own endemic forms of *Psittacula* parakeets. There was a parakeet on the Seychelles (*P. wardi*), Rodrigues (*P. exsul*), Reunion (*P. eques*) and Mauritius (*P. eques echo*). All of these are now extinct

except the beautiful Echo Parakeet of Mauritius which tenuously hangs on to survival in the remnant upland forest of the island. As the last surviving species of this group it is of very special importance.

The Echo Parakeet is similar to the Ring-necked Parakeet but is a bigger, heavier bird (about 160g) and is a darker, brighter green. It has a shorter, broader tail and has broader, more rounded wings. It also flies with slower wing beats. The adult male has a beautiful black and pink blaze on either side of the neck forming an incomplete collar. The male has a red beak and the female a black beak. Museum taxonomists used to consider the Echo Parakeet a race of the Ring-necked Parakeet *P. krameri*, but no one now holds that view since they are so very different in ecology, behaviour, vocalisations and morphology. Echo Parakeets and Ring-necked Parakeets are found in the same forest but they rarely interact and they have never hybridised.

Many conservationists have felt that the Echo Parakeet is beyond saving and some even claim it's not worth the effort. However, when one sees the very last birds in the Black River Gorges rapidly flying and circling over the forest canopy, the question that comes to mind is not should we save the Echo Parakeet, but how do we save this unique bird?

Only 12-15 Echo Parakeets remain and only three females are known. The population has been reduced by habitat destruction and the increasing impoverishment of the remaining forests by habitat degradation. Introduced weedy plants

take over from the native trees and shrubs and simplify the whole forest. In the 1970s a World Bank-financed project cut down perhaps one half of the parakeets' habitat and unwittingly chopped down most of the remaining trees of the "Tatamaka" *Calophyllum parviflorum*, a very important food species for the parakeets during winter months. The poor parakeets had the carpet pulled out from under them. The population crashed from about 50 birds in the early 1970s to just a handful in the early 1980s, all confined to a block of forest of about 50 sq. km. During the late 1970s and early 1980s there was little breeding activity and few, if any, young were produced. During the last five years or so the situation has improved a little and it appears that the remaining birds are adapting to other foods including the introduced guava and there have been a few breeding attempts. All is not lost and there is still a good chance that we can bring the parakeet back on the brink.

During the last decade many conservationists have wracked their brains to try and come up with a solution to save the Echo Parakeet. We have argued incessantly about the best way to proceed and all now feel confident that careful management of the wild population and captive breeding offers the best hope.

We intend to look after the few remaining birds and manage them very carefully. Our first priority is to get the birds to take additional food which we hang in trees where the parakeets feed. We have experimented widely at this over the years and have managed to get the parakeets to sample chillies,

grapes and apples, but we have yet to be able to get them to regularly return for food. Our eventual aim is to feed the parakeets daily on a bird table. Once we are able to achieve this the parakeets would not have to spend a large percentage of their time foraging as they do now, and would have enough surplus reserves to breed.

Not all the pairs breed and some apparently fail to find adequate nest-holes. Careful studies over the last 16 years have shown that of those that do attempt to nest, only about 40% of pairs will eventually fledge young. The reasons for this are mainly competition for the nest-holes. Breeding birds may be usurped from their homes by Ring-necked Parakeets or Common Mynahs and we also suspect that a variety of predators take the eggs and young. To add to their problems non-breeding males may interfere with breeding pairs and totally disrupt them.

To increase the chances of breeding we poison rats around nest sites. We provide hollowed out logs and nest-boxes for the parakeets to use and keep them free of competitors.

In an effort to increase the productivity of the wild birds we intend to remove first clutches of eggs and rear them in captivity under Ring-necked Parakeets. Hopefully the wild birds will then lay a replacement clutch. To build up our captive stock we may also catch some of the surplus non-breeding male parakeets. There is every hope that captive breeding will work. We have kept Echo Parakeets in captivity in the past and although they did not live long enough to breed there is every indication that they can be kept and bred in captivity.

What is the long term hope for the parakeets? Provided we can get these birds out of their present population bottleneck there are many possibilities for managing the wild population indefinitely, perhaps by using some of the ideas suggested above. If we succeed in building up a large enough captive stock they could be released on other islands in the Indian Ocean where there is suitable habitat but no parrots, such as on Reunion or Christmas Island. The case of the Echo Parakeet was once considered hopeless but the more we look at the situation the more optimistic we become that something can be done to save this species.

An important contribution from the World Parrot Trust will be put towards the management of the wild birds. This is a joint project with the government of Mauritius, the Mauritius Wildlife Appeal Fund and the Jersey Wildlife Preservation Trust.

Carl G. Jones

